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THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST^{*}

MATT. 27:11-50; 28:1-20

REV. WILLIAM CALDWELL, PH.D.

Fort Worth, Texas

It is interesting to note that Matthew devotes one-fourth of his gospel to the death of Jesus and the events occurring within the last week, leading up to the death. He cannot then be writing a complete biography of Jesus, but is presenting a drama of the "death struggle 'twixt old systems and His Word." It is the struggle of truth against custom, as in the case of Socrates; but it is far more; it is the struggle of the religion of the Spirit against the religion of external authority.

The struggle is fully on in Matt. 21:23, when ecclesiastical officialism asks, "By what authority doest thou these things, and who gave thee this authority?" Jesus' counter-question concerning their view of the authority of John the Baptist is not a mere retort to stop the mouth of an opponent, but is just the question of authority transferred to another field so as to become an objective question free from personal bias. If officialism cannot recognize divine authority in the unofficial John the Baptist, there is no common criterion for authority in general, hence there can be no understanding of the authority of Jesus. The idea of divine authority communicated directly is beyond the range of these "machine" religionists. The Bearer of the gospel which "finds and fills the heart of every man" open to receive it must be rejected by those who set up an institutional entity between the soul and God.

But Jesus is not simply on the defense. The parables that follow "carry the war into Africa." In the parable of the Two Sons Jesus tells the regnant officialism that publicans and harlots will go into the kingdom before them. In the parable of the Wicked Tenants Jesus says, "The Kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof."

^{*} This material covers the International Uniform Sunday-School Lessons for December 11 and 18.

The struggle takes a new turn from the theological question of authority to the political question of patriotism, insincerely propounded by a joint committee representing both sides of the question—a committee from the Pharisees made up of Pharisees and Herodians. This new question is, “Is it right under the theocracy to pay tribute to the Roman emperor?” Though it is a casuistic question meant to ensnare Jesus, and though the Herodians are used as cat’s-paws, the main issue is really unchanged—the divine authority of the hierarchy.

The counter-question of Jesus as to how David can call a Messiah, who is merely the son of David, Lord, again touches the question of authority, and suggests a later utterance, “No man can call Jesus Lord, but by the Spirit.” The outcome of the struggle between the authority of truth and the authority of the hierarchy is evident. Truth must go to the scaffold in order to sway the future. “The death of Jesus was not only historically inevitable but teleologically necessary.”

THE TRIAL AND DEATH OF JESUS. MATT. 27:11-50

When Jesus comes before Pilate the Jewish hierarchy has already given the death sentence (Matt. 26:66). But his death cannot be simply a Jewish matter. The power of life and death is in the hand of the gentile governor. When Jesus stands before Pilate the first question, “Art thou King of the Jews?” shows both the charge that had been laid against Jesus by the hierarchy, and Pilate’s recognition of the emptiness of the charge. Pilate is to be credited with an earnest desire to release Jesus, but he is to be condemned for his lack of the principle of justice. He, however, is not acting on his own initiative. On the one hand, he is forced to try a case against his will; on the other, he is carrying out the conciliating, time-serving policy of Rome. While he hesitates and waits for the breeze that is to fill his sail and determine his direction, a crowd having come up, demands its annual feast-day privilege, the release of a prisoner. This happy circumstance Pilate attempts to use for the release of Jesus. He will play the sympathies of the crowd, which may have shared in giving Jesus the title of King, against the rulers who have been stirred to envy



THE MOUNT OF OLIVES: LOOKING NORTHEAST FROM ACROSS THE KIDRON

on account of the popularity of Jesus. But the crowd is always in unstable equilibrium between the priest and the prophet, with all the natural advantage on the side of the priest who is in control of the machinery of the established order. In this case the failure of Jesus after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem to carry out the popular idea of the Messiah made it easy now for the first time to turn the crowd against him. The note slipped into Pilate's hand from his wife, relating her warning dream, is passed over by the other evangelists. It is a kind of echo-conscience come to disturb, but powerless to guide. Pilate is on the judgment seat but there is no place beside him for conscience or justice. Another detail peculiar to Matthew is the dramatic act of Pilate washing his hands and declaring that he is "innocent of the blood of this just person." All the people said, "His blood be on us and on our children," little dreaming of the awfulness of the deed in its moral character or in its age-long consequences.

This vain spectacular performance over, Pilate was forced by the mob to do what he did not have courage to refuse to do. "And when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified." Scourging was a preliminary part of crucifixion. This brutality, whatever its original purpose, was not without its merciful compensation, for it shortened the unspeakable agony of the cross, if death did not result from the scourging itself. The soldiers regarded condemned persons as their natural prey to relieve the enforced tedium of their lives. And this was an extraordinary case—the case of one who had claimed to be a king. It was worth while that the whole cohort of six hundred soldiers should assemble in the common hall to witness the merriment of a mock coronation. A scarlet military cloak served for royal purple, a reed for a scepter, a wreath of thorn-twigs for a crown. They bowed the knees in mock obeisance, then, with brutal horseplay, spit upon him and smote him over the head with the reed. This inhuman treatment doubtless left Jesus so exhausted as to be unable to carry his cross according to custom. A Cyrenian Jew, one of the visitors to the Feast perhaps, was compelled to bear the cross.

Arriving at Golgotha, Jesus is ready to fall from exhaustion, but refuses the stimulant offered him. In the dividing of his

garment Matthew sees a fulfilment of prophecy (Ps. 22:18). The parallel is more clearly brought out in John 19:24.

Vs. 23 shows that Pilate believed Jesus innocent of the crime of treason, so that the inscription above his head is only the "accusation" (vs. 37). John tells us that the superscription was written in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew—the languages of the three great civilizations, which, in different ways, had prepared the highways for the coming king, who had to come, to the amazement of all who expected him, by the way of the cross.

The robbers on the two crosses, the chief priests, the scribes, the elders, and the mob are reduced to a common denominator in their attitude of derision toward the Sufferer. They seem to have won; the claims of Jesus seem to have been empty. The common circle of ideas, even some of the words, recall the initial struggle of Jesus in the temptation in the wilderness. Nothing can be more foreign to the natural heart of man than victory through surrender, a kingdom through sacrifice. Nothing could be more natural than to say, "If thou be the Son of God come down from the cross." Nothing could be more supernatural than, being the Son of God, to become obedient unto death. Yet Jesus' way, the way of the cross, proved the way of the crown (Phil. 2:9-11).

The cry of Jesus on the cross, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" is an utterance from the twenty-second psalm. In the mouth of the psalmist it expresses the feelings of a sufferer left for some inscrutable reason to the will of his enemies. But the psalmist's faith has not lost hold of God, nor has God deserted the psalmist. Jesus feels himself in a parallel situation, and after six hours of extreme bodily suffering and unfathomable mental anguish he utters this agonizing human cry—perhaps more an exclamation than a question, or if a question, one wrung from bewildered astonishment, like the cry in Gethsemane.

While Jesus' meaning is not for a moment to be limited to the historical significance of the words he uses, still the theological idea that, since Jesus is here bearing our sins in his own body on the tree, God has withdrawn himself from him in the supreme moment of his sacrifice, is not clearly indicated.

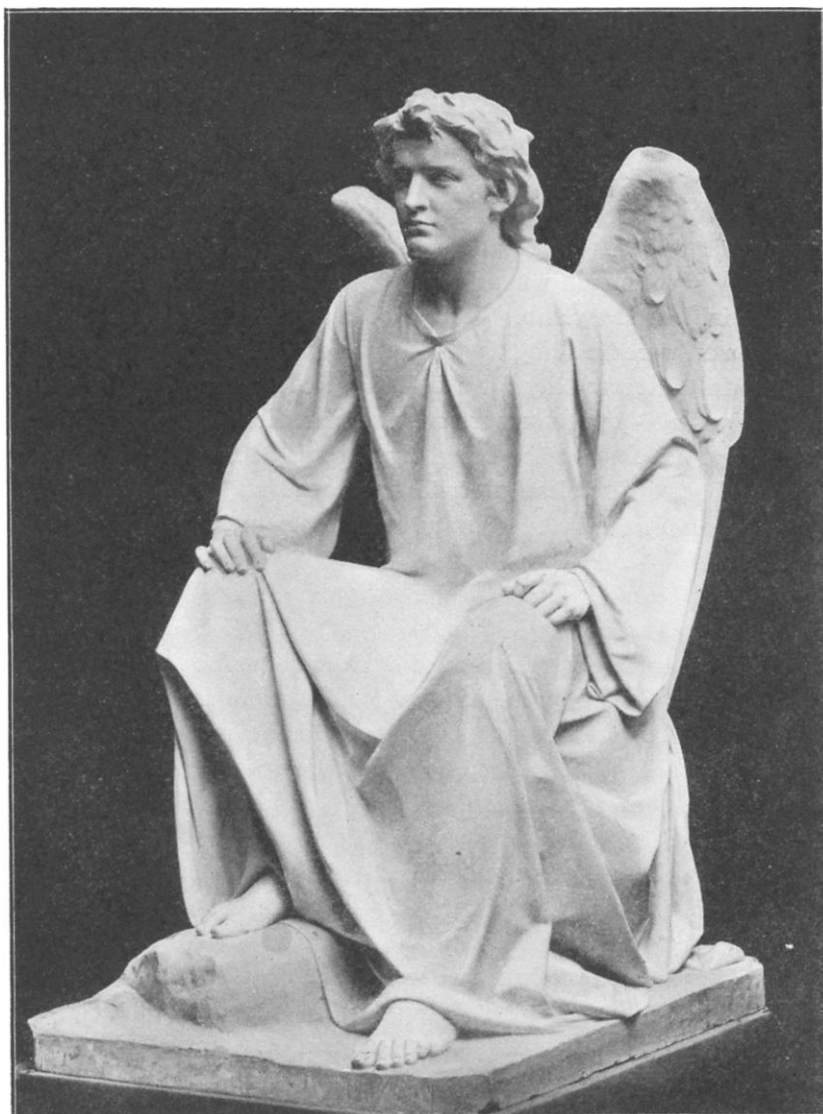
THE RESURRECTION, MATT. 28:1-20

Matthew gives only one section of the resurrection story which is found in the four gospels and in the fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians. On the other hand, he gives independent material, e.g., the account of the earthquake and the angel rolling away the stone (vss. 2-4), the report of the guard to the chief priests, with their bribe and instruction to say that the disciples stole away the body (vss. 11-15), and the meeting of Jesus with the Eleven on some mountain in Galilee. None of the sacred writers attempts to give us a full history of the resurrection. Each writer is concerned with the practical interest of the evidence for the fact of the resurrection. The stories when taken together present numerous difficulties. A perfect harmony of details can hardly be reached; but when the circumstances and the nature of the occurrence are considered, this is by no means surprising. Even in so mundane a thing as the battle of Waterloo, happening in the modern critical world, with all the modern facilities for acquiring facts accurately, the accounts as to details are hopelessly conflicting. For example, as to the time the battle began, the Duke of Wellington said ten o'clock, General Alava, who rode beside him, said half-past eleven, Napoleon and Drouet said twelve o'clock, Ney said one o'clock. The one fact they all agreed on was that it began, and their witness to this fact has not been impaired by differences.

Matthew's account contains two appearances, first, to the women who are hurrying away from the empty tomb with the angelic message to the disciples; second, to the eleven disciples in Galilee on the mountain where Jesus had told them to meet him. This latter appearance is the important one. In it the great commission is given.

"Some doubted" can hardly mean some of the eleven, but others who were there. In this conference we see the struggle for authority is now ended. Truth slain has risen again, and Jesus' first word to his disciples is, "All authority in heaven and on the earth has been given to me."

No ending to the gospel could be more appropriate than Christ's commission to disciple all nations and baptize them in his name. For the lordship that has been given must be made actual; Christ



By permission of the sculptor

Erastus Dow Palmer

THE ANGEL AT THE SEPULCHER

must be Lord indeed. "He is Lord of all, or not Lord at all." The spirit of Christ, of Christianity, is missionary. It is inconceivable that the disciples, having found the Savior, and believing him the Savior of all, shall not wish to give the knowledge of him to all.

THE FACT AND MEANING OF THE RESURRECTION²

1. Jesus expected and predicted that he would rise from the dead, though his statements were not clear and strong enough to reach the understanding and heart of his disciples. They were mentally preoccupied when he had spoken; now their hopes were buried in Joseph's tomb. Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, and the women were finishing up their tasks of love to the dead, bringing burial spices to stay for a little time the power of corruption. There was no hope of resurrection. The disappointment of the women at not finding the body, the astonishment of the apostles, the doubts of disciples, all conform to the statement: "For as yet they knew not the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead."

2. Jesus' predictions involved that he should continue to enjoy God's favor, that he should be with his disciples, and that he should be active in the work of the kingdom of God on earth.

3. This is the important matter for Christian faith. However interesting the questions of the nature of the resurrection body and the manner of the resurrection, they are nevertheless of secondary importance. The essential thing that faith demands is the living Christ present in our hearts and lives and in the church.

4. And whatever differences in detail appear in the gospels, they leave us in no uncertainty as to the main point. The Eleven and Paul bear unequivocal testimony to an unshakable confidence that Jesus manifested himself after death to his disciples and talked with them. "The primary testimony of the disciples to Jesus was their testimony to his resurrection: except as Risen and Exalted they never preached Jesus at all."

5. Paul's witness differs in some respects from that of the earlier disciples. His testimony has peculiar value because he is the trained leader of the Jewish opposition, a contemporary who knew

² See Burton and Mathews, *Life of Christ*, 289-92.

all that the Jews could allege against the resurrection and yet is converted from opposition to faith.

6. The testimony of the gospels to the empty tomb is of value only as it fits into the chain of positive evidence. We start with the undisputed fact of the empty tomb. If it had not been empty the fact must have been known to the disciples and to Paul and have precluded faith in the resurrection. The story of robbery given by the guard is valueless. In the first place, it is highly improbable that the whole guard should be asleep when sleeping was punishable with death, and, second, if they were asleep they couldn't tell what happened. The hypothesis that the body was stolen has a twofold difficulty. If the Jews stole it Paul would have known it, and if the disciples stole it the martyr-faith in the resurrection would have been impossible.

7. "The real historic evidence for the resurrection is the fact that it was believed, preached, propagated, and produced its fruit and effect in the new phenomenon of the Christian church." It is admitted by all that without the belief in the resurrection there could have been no Christian church. The fact that produced that faith, as given in the gospels, repeated in the epistles, believed in by the church, is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.